

A Global, Community Building Language?

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Although long championed, a global language has not come to fruition despite considerable efforts. Many fear that such a language would undermine the particularistic, identity-constituting primary languages of local and national communities. These concerns can be addressed at least in part by utilizing a two-tiered approach in which efforts to protect primary languages are intensified at the same time that a global language is adopted as an additional language and not as a substitutive one. Although the U.N. or some other such global organization could, theoretically, choose a language to serve as the global language, English is already (and increasingly) occupying this position as a result of the colonial period and post-colonial developments. In this respect, English is compared to the development of the railroad system in the United States, which although introduced at considerable human costs by overpowering corporations, later became an integral part of the economy and society. Whether English should be adopted as a second language, or as a third or fourth one, is heavily influenced by the level of difficulty involved—the labor to fluency ratio—in acquiring a new language.

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The Failure of Primary Global Languages

The merits of a global language have been touted throughout the ages. The Bible famously lays out the benefits of having one tongue understood by all people, for one and all, and describes the devastating effects that follow when such a language is absent. The allegory presented in Genesis (11:1–9) is so well narrated one hardly can improve on it:

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there...Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."... And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

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The term “babel” has come to be associated with meaningless talk and confusion; the result of having multiple tongues, each one incomprehensible to speakers of others. As the allegory portrays it, “babel”-induced confusion is powerful enough to prevent the people of the world from acting in unison, whether against the Lord or to construct a world they desire.

The idea of a global language regained its popularity in 17th-century Europe. John Amos Comenius, an advocate of universal education, called for a universal language to provide the most efficient transmission of human knowledge. In his *Via Lucis* (1641), Comenius writes:

...there are throughout the world as many different languages as there are peoples (and how many these are we do not know), and since for that reason (until that barrier is removed) there can be no open way to most of the peoples of the earth, it must be our business to take thought for the establishment of a single language common to them all. And if such a language can be found and brought into use (as those earlier inventions were), then we shall have what we are seeking, a perfectly open way for teaching all necessary things to all men (Comenius 1938:141–142).

Comenius noted that a shared language is necessary to people to communicate with one another. To teach “all necessary things to all men,” as Comenius wished to do, one would have either had to (1) learn every language that exists in the world or (2) learn one language that all of the world’s people can speak and understand. Comenius explains that “the second alternative is beyond question the better...For all men will understand better when they use the same sounds” (Comenius 1938:179).

What will this universal language be? Comenius considered Latin, but noted that to choose it would be “providing preferentially for ourselves, to whom it is already known, and not with equal fairness for uncivilized peoples (though for them we ought to have a larger consideration in this matter as they make up the larger part of the world)” (Comenius 1938:182). Hence Comenius favored a language not already known by any group of people, a language that someone would have to invent. Such a language should be “easier,” “pleasanter,” and “more perfect” than any existing language. It should be “rational,” “analytical,” and “harmonious.” If such a language were to be created, Comenius imagined:

...all men would delightedly recognize that it would be the most appropriate means for reconciling them to each other and their concepts of things to the truth. Then at last that age of illumination and of peace would have dawned and could be proclaimed, an age in which there would be light and quiet in things, and in words which are the vehicles of concepts (Comenius 1938:182).

Comenius envisioned a language based on a theoretical scheme, a language that could (like mathematics) express the relationships between things without exceptions or ambiguity. Such a language is classified by linguists as an “a priori” language (Janton 1993:5). Perhaps the best historical example of an a priori language was put forth in John Wilkins’s “Philosophical Language” (1668, 2002), an essay that includes a scheme for categorizing all known concepts and assigning them new, non-arbitrary names that would express their relationships with other known concepts.

Whereas the creators of a priori languages strive for logical perfection, the creators of a posteriori languages strive for ease of learning. A posteriori languages consciously imitate natural languages but simplify their grammar. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the creation of a series of a posteriori

languages, including Volapük in 1879, Esperanto in 1887, Spelin in 1888, Ido in 1907, and Interlingua in 1951 (Kamman 1942; Sharpe 1961; Staller 1994).

By far the best-known a posteriori language is Esperanto. Esperanto was launched in Warsaw in 1887, when Lazar Ludwik Zamenhof published the booklet *Lingvo Internacia* (“International Language”) in Russian, under the pseudonym Doktoro Esperanto (Jordan 1987:40). Esperanto uses the same 26-letter alphabet as English and has 16 fundamental rules, laid down by Zamenhof in the *Fundamento de Esperanto* (Jordan 1987:42). Language teachers estimate that while it takes 6 years to become “conversationally fluent” in English, one can attain the same level of proficiency in Esperanto in just over 1 year (O’Connor 2004:B-1). Esperanto has been a great success compared to many other planned languages, but it remains a great failure in the speaking world. Estimates of the number of Esperanto speakers worldwide in 2006 range from 50,000 to 2 million speakers.¹

Thus, even the most successful artificial, planned shared language in the modern age has utterly failed.

The Merits and Demerits of a Global language

Before the discussion turns to examine a much more successful approach for promoting a global language, it is worthwhile to briefly recite the main benefits and disadvantages involved in fashioning such a language and who benefits and who carries the resulting burdens. Anyone who has observed, or even just imagined, an international meeting of civil servants from scores of nations, the staffs of various international NGOs, or organizers from several transnational social movements will find it self-evident that their work is much served by being able to confer with one another without the cumbersome and costly apparatus of simultaneous translation. (This is of special importance for those groups constrained by limited operating budgets and assets, such as the organizers of most transnational social movements and the less endowed voluntary associations.)

Adopting a global language would greatly reduce the costs of conducting transactions and communications across national borders, whether for public affairs (e.g., conflict resolution, coordinated reactions to natural disasters, preventing environmental degradation, and building coalitions for social causes) or private affairs (e.g., economic activities).² It seems equally self-evident that the sharing and communication of technical and scientific knowledge across borders would benefit from not having to be translated.

Some even hope that a global tongue would lead to a world in which “prejudices and stereotypes would be dismantled or differentiated, and more flexible cooperation (not merely in the context of the economy) would become possible” (Apeltauer 1993:281). It seems safe to assume that a global language would reduce gross misunderstandings that occur when international agreements, treaties, and laws inadvertently acquire different interpretations arising from translations into a variety of languages.

In an age where the benefits of a global language are not frequently considered, some strictly illustrative examples from the European Union can serve to highlight these merits and some of the pitfalls of “babel.” As of January 1, 2007,

¹It is commonly assumed that Esperanto was intended as a global primary language—intended to replace all other languages. In fact, the creator of Esperanto quite explicitly advocated it as a secondary global language. (See Okrent 2006:96; Gordon Jr. 2005.)

²In fact, sharing a global, common language may promote bilateral trade. On this, see Ku and Zussman (2006).

the EU has 27 member states and 23 official languages.³ The EU Charter stresses the importance of multilingualism among its citizens, explaining:

...languages are not a mere means of communication. They contribute to a better knowledge of other European cultures and have a real potential for a deeper understanding between European citizens. Multilingualism policy aims at ensuring multiculturalism, tolerance and European citizenship. Widespread general competence in foreign languages also plays its part in keeping xenophobia and intolerance at bay. We have to understand each other if we want to reap the full benefits of the cultural, social, and economic richness of our continent (Key Data 2004:3).

Given, however, that no one can learn all the languages of the EU, this kind of mutual understanding would be best served by more Europeans coming to learn the same additional language to their primary tongue. The absence of an official, shared EU language necessitates that 13% of the EU's administrative costs—about € 807 million per year—be dedicated to interpretation and translation of official transcripts, documents, court rulings and regulations into all of the 23 official languages.⁴ In addition to exacting these considerable financial costs, numerous misunderstandings arise because of subtle (and not-so-subtle) differences in interpretation as a result of these multiple translations.

Some examples: in 2006, Jean-Claude Trichet, president of the European Central Bank (ECB), outlined a change in financial policy using the rather simple words “strong vigilance” (Scheller 2004:136–137). Translated into various languages these words communicated subtle yet significantly different positions. In Spanish these two words were translated as *extrema vigilancia*, which implied a much stronger change in policy than the English original and led Spanish observers to worry that “the central bank is facing galloping inflation” (Atkins and Blas 2006:7). Thus, even with a team of terminologists dedicated to the task of carefully parsing the bank's statements, it is difficult to preserve nuance across the 23 official EU languages in which the ECB is required to produce official statements and reports (Atkins and Blas 2006:7).

Another example: formulating the Preamble to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights led to a conflict between Germany, which favored including reference to a religious heritage, and France, which opposed such a reference. The English term “spiritual and moral heritage” was adopted, scripted in the French text as *patrimoine spirituel et moral* while in German, the text read *geistig-religiösen und sittlichen Erbes*.⁵ Thus, Germany gained through translation that which it could not successfully achieve at the negotiation table (Vink 2006:6)! This kind of inconsistency would hardly be possible if all the member nations involved used a single shared language for all official and public transactions.

Yet another example of the difficulty of preserving meaning across languages appears in the title of the “Treaty Establishing the European Community.” The French, Italian, and Portuguese for “instituting” appears,⁶ and the English text

³Romanian, Bulgarian, and Gaelic will be added as official languages. (See Tagliabue 2006; EUROPA 2006.)

⁴“The costs for translation include salaries, social security, overheads for infrastructure etc., cost of external translation and operating costs, but not the costs to the Member States of, among other things, the education and training of translators or the translation of the *acquis*... After the 2004 enlargement, the proportion of the total EU budget accounted for by translation is estimated to be around 0.8%, and it comes to around 13% of the administrative expenditure of the EU institutions (operating at full speed)” (EUROPA 2007).

⁵Spanish: *patrimonio espiritual y moral*; Italian: *patrimonio spirituale e morale*; Portuguese: *património espiritual e moral*; Dutch (a Germanic language), *geestelijke en morele erfgoed*.

⁶These are, respectively, *instituant*, *istituiscce*, and *institui*.

refers to “establishing,” but the Spanish use the term *constitutivo* or “constituting” instead of *establece*. As a result, the Spanish version of the text suggests the presence of a much stronger, constitutional treaty than other versions (Vink 2006:6).

In sum, significant costs and difficulties arise when numerous languages are used simultaneously during efforts to form shared understandings and follow agreed policies. These difficulties are amplified during efforts to engage in the building of a new, regional, multinational community, which requires the formation of bonds of affection, shared values and a sense of affinity. These costs could be avoided if the members of a given community would come to share one language as an additional language to their primary tongue.⁷ These “babel”-induced costs, and the benefits of a shared language, are even greater when viewed on a global rather than on a regional scale, for instance in the work of the United Nations.

At the same time, proponents of a shared regional language, let alone a global one, must deal with the fact that language constitutes a key element of the identity, bonds, history, and culture of many existing communities, whether on a national or merely ethnic level. This intimate connection between language and culture leads many to oppose the prospect of a shared language (Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari 2003:especially 1–21, 45–59; Phillipson 2001; Sonntag 2003). Indeed, far from seeking to embrace a shared language, the priority of many national and ethnic communities has been to protect and promote their particularistic tongue. For instance, since the 1970s many of the Bretons of France have sought to revive their native language; they view Breton as an important element of the culture of the Brittany region that has been endangered due to French linguistic hegemony (Sonntag 2003). Endeavors to promote Catalan in the four Spanish provinces and French in Quebec exemplify similar efforts to preserve identity by protecting a particularistic language from a more widely shared one.

In short, although the merits of a shared language can be readily outlined, the sociological and communitarian foundations of the opposition are similarly strong. Hence, the quest for a shared language must take a different course: instead of replacing the mother tongues, the global language is best considered as an additional language.

Particularism and Universalism

Like most stark dichotomies, the opposition between particularism and universalism is greatly overstated. Societal designs are not limited to either keeping one’s community, identity, and culture or submerging them into a more encompassing sociological entity. The conception that people’s worldview is either that of villagers (of “locals”) or cosmopolitan is clearly inaccurate. It is a serious sociological misunderstanding to assume that people follow *either* local, particularistic values *or* universal ones, such as those encased in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (The same simplification is evident among those European and Japanese intellectuals and leaders who approach the issue of immigration as though the only options to dealing with it are either unbounded multiculturalism or full assimilation.)

Societies are typically composed like Chinese nestling boxes, in which smaller communities are integrated into more encompassing ones, and these often into still more encompassing ones (Etzioni 1996:189–216). (Hence it is best to

⁷Because a shared language will serve not merely instrumental purposes but also expressive ones, a language with a paltry, minimalist vocabulary like Jean-Paul Nerriere’s “Globish,” will not serve. (See Nerriere 2004.)

consider a society as a community of communities, not one that holds X million individuals. It is a two or multiple tiered social structure.) The said integration is achieved by dividing loyalties and identifications between those where more encompassing entities takes precedence (e.g., the nation, in most matters concerning relations with other nations) versus those in which the smaller communities govern (e.g., the state or local governments in the United States, which set a good part of the curriculum of local schools). There are considerable variations in the ways national and local communities share people's commitments and affections, but most if not all societies have at least two layers of such commitments. Moreover, over time one layer tends to gain in influence over the other. For instance, in U.S. history, until the 1870s, local loyalties often trumped national ones; after the Civil War, national loyalties grew stronger. Since WWII, several attempts have been made to introduce additional, supranational layers of loyalty⁸ of which EU is the most successful case in point, as well as build up some level of commitment to the global community as a whole, especially to the United Nations.⁹

This two-tiered model provides a structure for a global language that will have many of the benefits of a shared tongue while imposing minimal side-effects to particularistic communities. Following such a societal design, one would seek not to replace particularistic languages that are constitutive of various communities, but rather to add a universal language to them. For instance, the French could continue to study and speak French as their "mother" tongue, enjoy all the subtleties of its literature, particular imagery, nuances, and identity-affirming content. However, when communicating with members of other societies, they would be able draw on one shared language. To put it differently, the model of layered loyalties and identities views the global language as additive, rather than as a language that would replace particularistic ones. These particularistic languages serve constitutive roles in communities; displacing these languages would be subtractive.¹⁰

This approach may seem very plausible, even self-evident, until one notes that it requires that *the additional language to be taught and used by all nations would have to be one and the same*. If this development is to take place, we shall see it require a major change in public policies of many nations.

None of this should be understood as opposing people learning third and fourth languages, which could be shared on a regional or transregional or even global basis, or as objecting to the fact that different people will continue to acquire different mixes of languages. The only necessary condition is that they all learn one shared language.

English: The de Facto Lingua Terra

In theory, a U.N. commission could examine the issue and answer the question: Which language would best serve as the additional, global language? But this decision has already effectively been made, although not as a result of any meeting of any deliberative body.

⁸See Etzioni 2004.

⁹A reviewer of a previous draft of this paper pointed out that cosmopolitan communities and cultures necessarily reflect some particular people's power and cultural preferences (see, for example, Calhoun 1995). I agree with this point. However, the fact that both levels of community have such a composition does not negate the fact that communities can be and in fact are organized in a layered way, which allows for various combinations of the local and the cosmopolitan elements rather than forcing a stark choice between the two. Nor does it mean that one cannot work for the least inegalitarian structure feasible in such a layered community.

¹⁰On this point, see Wojtowicz (2006:4) and (Lambert 1981).

Mandarin Chinese, one could argue, is in actuality the language more people speak than English and hence is the proper *terra lingua*. However, it is not the largest number of people who speak to other members of their nation or civilization with a particular language that is the crucial factor, but rather the number of those who use a given language to communicate across borders and cultures. Here, English has reached a level that makes it difficult to imagine how it could be replaced.¹¹ Nearly a quarter of the world's population (between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people) are fluent or competent in English (Crystal 1997:4–6). An article entitled “The New Latin: English Dominates in Academe” reports:

Ninety-five percent of the 925,000 scientific articles published in thousands of major periodicals in 1997 were written in English, according to Eugene Garfield, founder of the Science Citation Index, which tracks science publications. But only half of the English articles originated in English-speaking countries. The trend toward publishing in English began after World War II and has accelerated over the past 20 years (Bollag 2000:A-73).

Furthermore, with many EU government officials already using English as a shared language,¹² English is becoming, “frankly rampant in the concrete-and-glass European quarter [of Brussels]” (Linguistic Follies 2007). Businesses from many nations use English as their working language: For instance, French luxury goods’ LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton and Italian appliance maker Indesit Company (formerly Merloni Elettrodomestici) use English as their official company language (Tagliabue 1998). European aircraft manufacturer Airbus’s working language has been English since it was established (Tagliabue 2002). The German postal service, Deutsche Post World Net, is increasingly using English as its working language (Tagliabue 2002).

In 2002, French President Jacques Chirac announced plans for a competitor to CNN, the BBC, and The Voice of America. He envisioned a 24-hour satellite news channel to present a French perspective in a world where he saw these other news channels as presenting an Anglo-American perspective. His plans were dubbed “CNN à la française.” But by 2006, the broadcaster’s executives decided English would play an important role; one channel would be in French and another would be in English. As a spokesman for France 24 explained the decision, “Eighty per cent of our target audience will be Anglophone. If we want pluralism in the field of international television news, we cannot ignore this. Our viewers will be opinion formers, journalists and people who travel a lot, and the language most common to them is English” (Randall 2006). Russia already has an English-language channel launched in 2005 (“Russia Today”). The Emir of Qatar’s Al-Jazeera launched an English-language channel in 2006 (“Al-Jazeera International”). Iran has plans underway to start one (“Press”). In addition, China is considering establishing an English-language news channel (Bryant 2006; Everybody 2006:63; Holton 2006). Whether their intentions are to make profits, win influence, or spread their values, these nations see having an English voice as a key part of their communication strategy.

In some fields, English is officially recognized as the globally shared language; for instance, as the language of air traffic control. Only rarely these days does

¹¹“...English has at last become of age as a global language. It is a phenomenon which lies at the heart of globalisation: English is now redefining national and individual identities worldwide; shifting political fault lines; creating new global patterns of wealth and social exclusion; and suggesting new notions of human rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Graddol 2006:12; also see Phillipson 2003).

¹²See EU politics 2004.

insufficient command of English still cause airplane crashes. The December 20, 1995, crash of American flight 965 in Cali, Colombia, was partly due to an English communication failure between the native-Spanish-speaking air traffic controller and the native-English-speaking pilot. The pilot, realizing he was running out of fuel, requested permission to land using phrases like “need for priority” and “landing priority.” The urgency the pilot meant to convey was not detected by the air traffic controller. The plane eventually crashed into a mountain, killing all 72 on board (Tajima 2004:458).

English has been established as the de facto global language; as an additional language to the primary “mother” tongues of the people of the world. My argument is not that this current privileged global position of English has been achieved in a proper or just way, or that some other language could not have served this function better. Rather, the incontestable fact is that currently English does so serve.

English: The Language of the Hegemon¹³

Critics correctly point out that English was introduced into many cultures and societies as part of colonization. After all, it is not accidental that the number one foreign language spoken in India, Ghana, and Nigeria is English. English has also been promoted in the post-colonial period by the introduction of a global consumerist mass culture led by American and multinational corporations and the American ethos of affluence.¹⁴ It was further propelled by American-initiated technological developments such as global commercial communication (e.g., satellites that made CNN possible) and the Internet, which initially were English dominated and to some extent still are. As a result, benefits accrued disproportionately to the United States and other English-speaking nations as consumers across the world sought to purchase Levi’s jeans, Starbucks coffees, McDonald’s patties and other American products. Even as these were increasingly produced overseas, American corporations continued to collect their franchise fees. Finally, English was also promoted by organizations such as the British Council and the Voice of America. Hence critics point out that to further recognize English as the global language is to further serve the hegemon (Macedo et al. 2003).

As I see it, the situation of global English is akin to the development of the railroad system in the United States. There is no question that they were laid at great human costs (especially to Chinese immigrant workers), that they inflicted suffering on communities through which they were paved, and that inadequate compensation was provided to those whose lands were taken by corporations which greatly benefited from the introduction of the railroads (Ambrose 2000). However, it does not follow that one can or should tear out the railroads and replace them with some other means of transportation, or cease to repair and improve them. There is a world of difference between the ways a given social element has been developed and its current value. Railroads have become such an integral part of the American economy and social life that there is no practical way to remove them; doing so would cause damage to numerous individuals and communities who now benefit from and rely on the transportation and jobs the railroads provide.¹⁵

¹³On this term see Gramsci 1991; Macedo et al. 2003.

¹⁴See, for example, Barber 1995; Hardt and Negri 2000.

¹⁵Niall Ferguson carries the point to an extreme, arguing that because the British Empire introduced the rule of law, reduced corruption, and promoted democracy as a part of its colonial rule, it can be considered, on a net basis a “Good Thing” (Ferguson 2002).

The same holds for global English. It seems very unlikely that English is going to be replaced in the foreseeable future with French, Chinese, Spanish, Swahili, or any other language—as is evidenced by the fact that all attempts to do so have failed.

Other Considerations

English as Threat to Particularism

The acquisition of English is feared to undermine the primary, constitutive language of extant communities. For instance, various cultural authorities are alarmed by the introduction of English terms and phrases into various national languages; Japanese, Brazilian, and French language experts have expressed concerns about encroachment by English words.¹⁶ English words that have infiltrated Japanese include *outsourcing*, *back office*, *redundancy*, *accountability*, *negotiation*, *literacy*, *interactive*, *helper*, *nice*, and *treatment* (French 2002). Like the Council on the Japanese Language, the Brazilian Academy of Letters has been called upon to act as some believe that Portuguese has been borrowing excessively from English, including words like *drive-in*, *hot dog*, *personal banker*, and *milkshake* (Rohter 2001). However, these penetrations seem limited in scope. Primary, national languages continue to dominate even in nations in which most citizens have acquired a considerable command of English.

Moreover, the English penetration can be further limited by providing terms in the primary language for these foreign words by the various language academies and by schools. For instance the Académie Française has replaced English intruders *start-up*, *e-mail*, and *web* with *une jeune pousse*, *message électronique*, and *la toile* (Ross 2004: 23). Furthermore, when English words are adopted, they are often modified to fit the prevailing national idiom and grammar. Thus verbs borrowed from English, when used in Holland, pick up the Dutch *-en* ending: to download in English becomes *downloaden* in Dutch, to log in becomes *inloggen*, to e-mail becomes *mailen* (Booij 2001). Patricia Goff has written extensively about still other methods and action that have been or can be taken to protect local cultures, primary languages included (Goff 2000:533–562).

Additional Language Constitutive Effects

Closely related is the concern that even an additional, “foreign” language has some constitutive effects both on the national and on the more encompassing communities. This holds for both instrumental and cultural reasons. Instrumentally the more people command a given language, say English, the more likely they are to conduct business transactions with others with whom they can readily communicate, and less likely to conduct business with those who speak some other language. Those who purchase equipment are more likely to purchase it if accompanied with English manuals or codes and so on. Such people are also more likely to view English-speaking movies, read English magazines and books, and study in universities abroad in which English is spoken. Thus, nations whose citizens command the global language as their mother tongue are reaping economic benefits and extending their cultural influence.

¹⁶For more on Japan see French (2002); for more on Brazil see Rohter (2001); for more on France see France (1996); also see Sonntag (2003:45–52).

These effects can be mitigated, albeit not wiped out. Companies from many nations have learned to include English manuals with the equipment they sell, thus pre-empting at least some of the language advantage of corporations from English-speaking nations. In the market of English-reading clients, movies are dubbed with particularistic languages which reduces the temptation to watch them in English; local cultural products (such as plays, movies, novels) are subsidized (Goff 2000). Other measures draw on translations produced by automated means (e.g., Google translator, Altavista Babel Fish).

Wisely, World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations recognize cultural exemptions to free trade, allowing for “protectionist” measures for cultural products (Figenbaum 2001). Cultural sensitivity in the sphere of world trade originates in a provision of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade “to protect national cultural treasures, of artistic, historical, or archaeological value”; this sensitivity towards culture was bolstered by the cultural exemption, established in part due to French concerns during WTO negotiations in the 1990s (Kennedy 2002).

The development of the Internet further illustrates both of the special privileges gained by those whose primary language is chosen as the world’s shared one, and the range of possible adaptations. The Internet was developed in the United States with mostly English-speaking users. In addition, as Bollag notes, a large amount of computer software is written in English (Bollag 2000:73). The very substantial gains generated by these technologies were initially largely reaped by English-speaking people, especially Americans.

Over time the Internet accommodated, enabling communication in other languages; the number of people who speak other languages and use it has greatly increased. Also its governance is moving towards a body that is increasingly independent from the American government, as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers 2006 agreement with the U.S. Commerce Department demonstrates (Shannon 2006:C-4). Thus, although those who command English as their primary language continue to have an advantage in cyberspace, this advantage is being curtailed and is likely to continue to decline in the future.

Policy Implications: The Labor to Fluency Ratio

If one grants, for the sake of the argument, that one favors a global language, one that people of different cultures and nationalities will acquire above and beyond their primary language and any others ones they learn—one faces an additional consideration: where should that language rank as compared to other languages (aside from the primary one—which ranks first by definition)? That is, should people be encouraged to learn it as their second language, as their third or fourth one, or at any rank they prefer? This may seem like a minor matter but, we shall see shortly, it is actually of considerable importance.

One may object that the choice of languages is a personal matter and that each person ought to be allowed to decide on her own which languages to learn. But this position fails to recognize the fact that language acquisition is currently very much affected by public policy. Educational authorities determine which languages are taught in schools. Legislators enact laws regarding which languages can be used in dealing with the courts and other public authorities, which languages can be used in public documents, on ballots, street signs and many other occasions, all of which affect the public’s propensity to study one language or another. Also, the availability of learning opportunities is itself an important factor. Some critics have chastised Mexican immigrants to the U.S. for “refusing to learn English” (Huntington 2004).

Actually, there is a great shortage of English classes for adult immigrants (Phillips 2007).

When this question of language policy is raised, the discussion usually focuses on how a nation should go about protecting its primary language. The discussion rarely turns to the matter of promoting a shared global language or questions what that language ought to be. Most glaringly absent in these discussions is the place of the global language in ranking of the distribution of educational and other public resources relevant to the teaching and fostering of languages.

The key relevant variable regarding this important but typically ignored question is the level of effort required to gain fluency in additional languages to the primary one. If acquiring one or more additional languages can be readily achieved, then the question which ranking of languages that public policy should promote is largely moot, because people could learn several languages in any sequence they please. If, in contrast, gaining fluency in even one additional language is very arduous for most people, then which language is chosen as the secondary one becomes considerably more important for policy-making. *Under these conditions, if the global language is not chosen as the second language, but instead as a third or fourth one, or merely as one option among many, most people will not learn to speak and read it, and the development of one global language will be significantly hindered.*

I have been able to find only anecdotal evidence showing that it is widely assumed by policymakers, educators, and the public at large that learning additional languages is not a particularly onerous task. For instance, it is often suggested that Americans command only English while people of many other nations speak and read in several languages. The Dutch and the Swiss are often held up as examples of people who speak several languages—German, French, and Italian, for instance, in Switzerland—and learn English to boot. Children are said to learn with great ease two or more languages.¹⁷

Actually, both informal interviews and some data suggest that the opposite is the case: many Swiss citizens do not command three languages. Indeed, Swiss linguists refer to the “collective myth of the multilingual Swiss” (Demont-Heinrich 2005:73). Informal interviews with several Swiss colleagues and diplomats found that most Swiss citizens have a rather limited command of other Swiss languages than the one used in their canton or region. As professor of German Ernst Apeltauer reported in 1993, “no more than about 6.2% of Swiss can be called multilingual (in a strict sense), with the majority of the Swiss population having no more than two languages at their disposal” (Apeltauer 1993:275). In Canada, although both English and French are official languages, only about 18% of Canadians know both (Census of Canada 2001).

In assessing the extent to which most people in most circumstances find it difficult to acquire additional languages, the question of what constitutes “fluency” arises. To further explore this matter requires taking into account that the acquisition of additional languages is affected by several factors. These include extent to which the second languages are of the same family of languages as the primary one, the sociolinguistic position of the primary relative to the second language (e.g., status as the dominant or minority language) (Horwitz 1986:686), and the broader social context (e.g., community expectations) (Stevens 1978:185; Goldin 1987: 650).¹⁸ When taking into account these factors, linguists divide second language learning into five

¹⁷For a discussion of English for young learners, see Graddol (2006:89).

¹⁸For additional factors see Cenoz and Valencia (1994); Sanz (2000).

stages: pre-production, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency. The pre-production stage encompasses the period when the learner is not yet speaking; learners are building their receptive vocabulary. This period may last from the first 10 hours to 6 months. In the early production stage, the learner can speak in one or two word phrases. The vocabulary of the learner is about 1,000 words. This stage may take from 6 months to a year. During the speech emergence stage, the learner can use simple phrases and sentences. The vocabulary of the learner is about 3,000 words. Learners reach this phase after 1–2 years of study. The intermediate fluency stage is characterized by a vocabulary of 6,000 words and more complex sentences in speech and writing. In intermediate fluency, the learner can express opinions and share their thoughts. Learners may reach this stage after 2–3 years of study. After 4–10 years of study, a learner reaches advanced fluency (Bank Street's Guide 2007). In short, most people, under most conditions, find gaining fluency in an additional language a demanding, laborious, and time-consuming task. The labor to fluency ratio is much higher than often assumed.

It follows that if the promotion of a global language is the policy goal, then language policies must ensure not only that this language be taught as widely as possible across borders, but also that it be promoted specifically as the *second* language. In contrast, the EU not only seeks to help promote the 23 primary, particularistic languages of its members (which is in line with the recognition of the constitutive community building role of primary languages) but also calls for multi-language capacity development. In 2002, the heads of state or governments at the Barcelona European Council called for “a sustained effort to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age” (Key Data 2004:3). However, they remained neutral on the question of which two languages ought to be learned. They did not suggest that all members should teach the same language as the secondary one, let alone suggest which one it would be. Promoters of a global language, recognizing the difficulty of learning additional languages, would promote a policy that asks all member countries to teach the same language as the secondary one.

In Conclusion

The particularistic benefits of a communal primary language are compatible with a global language. By taking a two-tiered approach to the issue, policies suggest themselves that favor not language replacement but language addition. To advance this goal, a key element of building a global community atop local communities requires that the various nations involved choose the same second language. Although theoretically what language this second one is going to be could be determined by a consultation among the nations of the world, English is already very much in this position. Public policies exist in many nations that promote the acquisition of additional languages but not a shared global language. This is to a considerable extent due to opposition to English. This opposition often conflates preventing English penetration into the primary language with resisting it as the second tongue. The opposition to adopting English as a shared, secondary global language delays overcoming the “babel” effects at great cost to the transparency of global laws, the promotion of shared understandings, and the efficiency of economic transactions. These policies would be less detrimental if most people, most of the time, could readily acquire English as a third or fourth language. However, gaining fluency in a language is difficult under most conditions. Hence, the importance of choosing English as the second language while protecting the primary ones and mitigating

the disadvantages of those who must learn it compared to those for whom it is the primary tongue.

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